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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000813

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [BBG](#) [RFE](#) [RL](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: FM STILL UPSET ABOUT RFE/RL BUREAU CHIEF
APPOINTMENT

REF: A. YEREVAN 778
[1](#)B. YEREVAN 779
[1](#)C. YEREVAN 811

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Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: FM Nalbandian reacted sharply to Ambassador's report of her conversation with RFE/RL President Jeffrey Gedmin, in which he had offered to explore "confidence building measures" to re-establish GOAM trust in RFE/RL objectivity. Nalbandian insisted "there was nothing that could be done" if RFE/RL declined to fire its brand-new bureau chief, who is associated with the opposition. He said Yenokyan was the second person RFE/RL hired from the circle of opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrossian, and this was a "symbolic last step." He strongly implied that RFE/RL would face retaliation from the GOAM. Ambassador pushed back firmly, noting such a rash action would be taken badly by the USG. She suggested that Gedmin might visit Yerevan; Nalbandian said if so he had better do so "very quickly." END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) AMBASSADOR UPDATES ON RFE/RL POSITION: On October 6, Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Nalbandian and responded to his concerns regarding Radio Liberty,s selection of Aghasi Yenokyan as its new Bureau Chief in Yerevan (refs B and C). While she made clear that RFE/RL is a separate organization, distinct from the U.S. Government, she said she had raised the GOAM,s concerns with the President of RFE/RL, Dr. Jeffrey Gedmin. Ambassador stated that Gedmin said the hiring decision had been made, and he hoped that Yenokyan would be judged based on his performance in his new job. She related that Gedmin said that if Yenokyan falls short of RFE/RL standards, the radio would take corrective measures. Ambassador conveyed Gedmin,s desire to launch a more constructive relationship between the radio and the GOAM and that he had suggested implementing "confidence-building measures."

[1](#)3. (C) NALBANDIAN INCENSED: As Ambassador paused for breath, Nalbandian flatly

said that if a decision had been made to keep Yenokyan on, "There was nothing that could be done." His face now bright red, the Foreign Minister said that the issue was not Yenokyan,s performance or his professionalism, but the public perception that the U.S. government, which funds RFE/RL, is using RFE/RL to signal USG support for opposition leader Levon Ter Petrossian (LTP). Nalbandian noted that Yenokyan was the second person RFE/RL had hired from the LTP camp, and this was "the symbolic last step."

¶4. (C) RETALIATION UNSPOKEN: He said that President Sargsian had told Deputy Assistant Secretary Matt Bryza what would happen, if the Yenokyan decision stood. When asked what would happen, the FM did not answer directly. Instead he noted that RFE/RL "is not working in Armenia on a legal basis" and vaguely noted a problem with the radio frequency. (NOTE: Embassy is unaware of any legal issues or problems with the radio frequency. END NOTE)

¶5. (C) A BAD IDEA: Ambassador pushed back, noting that RFE/RL operates independently and its actions should not be interpreted as the actions of the USG. Moreover, Armenia, as a country that says it is interested in fully transitioning to a democracy, should defend freedom of the press and the need for many voices in the nation,s media. She said that the Foreign

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Minister,s claim that Yenokyan is being judged not on his performance, but as the symbol of U.S. support for LTP would not be well received in Washington. We have made clear repeatedly, and she was repeating it again today: The U.S. does not take sides in Armenia,s internal political process. Nalbandian said he is a staunch defender of freedom of the press, but LTP is manipulating RFE/RL, so that the perception is that the USG is backing him. Nalbandian said that he understands that the U.S. and Armenia each want a strong relationship with the other. Therefore, the GOAM would have to take measures regarding the Yenokyan decision so that there would be no obstacle in our bilateral relations.

¶6. (C) COULD AN RFE/RL VISIT HELP?: Ambassador counseled the Foreign Minister not to act rashly, noting that if the GOAM did so, it would create an enormous bilateral problem -- not the reverse as the FM was suggesting. She suggested that Dr. Gedmin meet with GOAM officials in Yerevan, so that GOAM officials could be assured that RFE/RL has no ulterior motives in hiring Yenokyan. Nalbandian shook his head and said that if Dr. Gedmin were to come, he should come "very quickly," because he was sure that the GOAM would take steps very quickly to settle the Yenokyan issue.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Unfortunately, given the GOAM,s longstanding distrust of RFE/RL, we are not surprised that Nalbandian reacted badly, but his intensity on the point was dismaying and a bit surprising. Along with his oblique

comments that Gedmin should come "very quickly" it suggests to us that President Sargsian is quite upset. It,s possible that part of his comments were for effect, but there is no doubt that the Yenokyan appointment hit a nerve and it is likely that the GOAM will take some form of action. Throughout the conversation, Nalbandian declined to be specific about what actions would be taken, and at the end of the day, we do not believe it will be his decision but the President,s. However, one possibility is that the GOAM may deny RFE a radio frequency, as Nalbandian said that if action is taken "it won,t be us, but in the framework of the law." We interpret this to mean that the GOAM won,t take an overtly political action, but will apply some aspect of the law that they allege RFE is infringing to either harass RFE or take the radio off the air completely.

18. (C) COMMENT (CONTINUED): We strongly encourage Dr.Gedmin to come to Yerevan for high level meetings with the Armenians as soon as possible. Even if the GOAM does not take action against RFE, it is clear that RFE,s relationship with the government needs work on an urgent basis.
YOVANOVITCH